

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 8, pp. 151-154, February 2010

REVIEW

Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction: The Experience Book* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), ISBN: 978-0826495952

When Michel Foucault claims in an interview that he has “never written anything but fictions,”¹ perhaps he is hoping that his fictions, like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, will one day constitute a “limit experience.” Indeed, in several places Foucault acknowledges that the works of Samuel Beckett, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jorge Luis Borges, and Raymond Roussel function for him as limit experiences.² These books problematise his thought and inspire the creation of “experience books,” works of fiction that counter books of truth. In *Foucault and Fiction: The Experience Book*, Timothy O'Leary adeptly reveals this relation between literature and experience. The experience book, in the words of O'Leary – and Foucault’s three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* are unequivocal examples – “tears us away from ourselves and leaves us no longer the same as before.” (2) O'Leary questions how literature encourages readers “to modify [their] experience, in the sense that [they] would no longer experience the world in the same way as before.” (147) In short, he explores how fiction extols us to “think otherwise.” This oft-repeated phrase, which appears in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, alludes to Foucault’s work on the art of ethics. Following his exceptional first book, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (2002), O'Leary offers here an insightful exegesis of an ethics of fiction, an art that transforms readers’ experience of the world by daring them to think differently.

Foucault and Fiction demonstrates from the outset that O'Leary is deeply familiar with Foucault’s work on literature, experience and ethics, and perceptively links the transformative effects of literature with ethical practices of the self. This movement of thought forms the substance of chapters 5 and 8. In chapter 5, O'Leary frames experience as both “the general, dominant form in which being is given to an historical period” and a transgression that “take[s] us to the limits of

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘The History of Sexuality,’ in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 193.

² See Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’ and ‘The Thought of the Outside,’ in *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, edited by James Faubion (London, Penguin Books, 2000); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1966); and Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, translated by Charles Ruas (London: Continuum, 2004).

our forms of subjectivity.” (84) In other words, he locates in Foucault an economy of experience, or where experience conditions the possibility of our intelligibility, but at the same time facilitates a temporary process of ‘becoming otherwise’. In chapter 8, O’Leary explores the concomitant relation between fiction and ethics. Here he investigates how an experience of literature could become a technique of ethical self-transformation.

It should be noted that Foucault’s analysis of literature in the 1960s, as O’Leary identifies in chapter 3, remains arguably under-theorised by his interlocutors. (151) Even when it is discussed, it is seldom analysed in relation to Foucault’s later work on ethics. It is therefore commendable that O’Leary exposes this lacuna and evaluates Foucault’s theory of literature in light of his ethical turn. O’Leary discusses in this chapter how, for Foucault, literature is discontinuous, transgressive and transformative. It is “an experience of the outside, in terms of a disconcerting rushing of language that tears the subject away from him or herself.” (41-42) Consequently, O’Leary frames literature as a type of practice of the self. In fact, he compares the practice of reading to the Stoic use of self-writing (*hupomnemata*) and “the Buddhist practice of meditation.” (18) I would also add here the use of *parrhesia* and the use of pleasures (*chrēsis aphrodisia*). In chapter 3, O’Leary also discusses the implications of Foucault’s “turning away” from literature towards the end of the 1960s; his turning away from an analysis of the internal conditions of the literary text. (57)

Nonetheless, this book does move beyond simply describing how literature is capable of tending towards an “experience of the outside,” to evaluating whether “such unsettling experiences” are in fact valuable. (3) It is here that I believe we find the most incisive part of the book: O’Leary’s evaluation of a literature that practices an ethics of self-transformation. He argues that to be open to the transformative potential of literature, despite its possible dangers, is valuable, for an openness that aims to reconsider the rigidity of the world, to rethink our relations to others and self in “new and less constraining ways,” is productive in itself. (19) The author maintains “... it is the opening-up of the possibility for continued, sustained experiment that is itself valuable.” (20)

In addition to offering readers an insightful guide to Foucault’s work on literature, experience and ethics, *Foucault and Fiction* also reviews several books that constitute especially for O’Leary “limit experiences.” The examined literature includes writings by such Irish authors, poets and playwrights as Seamus Heaney (Chapter 2), Brian Friel (Chapter 4), James Joyce (Chapter 6), Samuel Beckett and Jonathan Swift (Chapter 7). In chapter 2, O’Leary critiques the Platonist dismissal of poetry in the *Republic* and explores Heaney’s “anti-Platonist defence of poetry.” (32) The chapter on Brian Friel examines an ethics of confusion, the disturbances of language that are central to his plays. (61) Chapter 6 studies the “historically constructed nature of experience” (95) in

Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while in chapter 7, O'Leary appraises the experimental and transgressive fictions of Beckett and Swift. What is common in this selection of literature however is an ethics that harnesses – for the benefit of the reader – the possibilities of metamorphosis. This kind of literature employs various techniques of fiction that are necessary for transforming readers' experience of their world.

I believe that the most interesting, albeit contentious argument in this book is that there exists something distinctive about the transformative experience of literature. O'Leary describes the singularity of this experience as its *fictionality through language*. (5-6) However, this qualitative difference does seem to encompass many different cultural and social experiences – for instance, watching a movie, listening to music or walking into an immersive art environment – and thus may unwittingly privilege the "profound" experience of literature or poetry over, for example, "just" watching a film. I would argue that watching a film or listening to music or walking into art installations actively involves the making of fiction through language, whether that language consists of images, words or sounds. This conflict is discussed in more detail in chapter 3, where O'Leary explores Foucault's own ambivalences concerning any distinctive "power" of literature. (57)

Moreover, O'Leary explicitly states that he does not "wish to argue that literature is capable of a unique kind of transformation." (5) He rejects a tendency towards privileging "the ethical significance of literature" over other "different means" by refusing to proffer a definition of literature, instead framing literature as an event. (5) Nonetheless, I am uncertain whether a book that discusses "what is shared across all the varieties of literature, from poems and plays to novels and short stories," (5) that is its fiction(ing) through language, is capable of avoiding any evaluative or hierarchical distinctions between the transformations that are inherent in the experience of different art forms. My point does not detract from the richness of *Foucault and Fiction*, but rather attempts to render visible a perennial battle between those who would like to isolate aesthetics or art from "everyday forms of experience" and theorists like Michel Foucault and John Dewey who envisage art as continuous with life. (8)

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book for readers interested in the work of Michel Foucault, literature theory and/or Irish literature. But I also endorse this book for those fascinated with how reading catalyses a "transformative" experience, an experience that can change your world in one "shocking or arresting" moment or gradually, through the passing of time. (148) *Foucault and Fiction* is pleasurable to read and astute in its use of philosophy, literature theory and reception studies. It is an integral text for anyone struggling to reconcile how art, ethics and politics merge in the transformative potential of literature. For literature, as Foucault intimates in the interview that I quoted at the

beginning of this review, “manufactures something that does not as yet exist,” and hence dissolves the borders that stringently maintain a discontinuity between art and life.³

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³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, edited by Colin Gordon (Pantheon, NY: 1980), 193.